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REPORT

**ON THE RESULTS OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT OF THE EXTERNAL
TRADE BULLETIN OF THE ESCWA REGION**

Summary

In the second quarter of 2008, the ESCWA secretariat conducted an evaluation of its long-standing annual publication, the *External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region*, which contains merchandise trade data for ESCWA member countries. The evaluation aimed to assess the overall quality of the *Bulletin* and yield insights into good practices and future trends in regional and international trade statistics dissemination programmes, so that the lessons learned can be applied to other statistical publications. This report provides information on the background, methodology and main results of the evaluation. The Statistical Committee is invited to discuss the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, particularly the recommendation to discontinue publication of the *Bulletin* in its present format, and to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative scenarios proposed.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. As part of the ongoing process of restructuring and improving the quality of its publications, in 2008 the ESCWA Statistics Division conducted a self-evaluation of its recurrent publication, *External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region*, and is submitting the main findings of the evaluation to the Statistical Committee for discussion and decisions.
2. The *Bulletin* is a long-standing annual publication that contains merchandise trade data for ESCWA member countries. While it is currently the main tool for the dissemination of trade statistics, primary trade data is also included in another ESCWA recurrent annual publication, the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*.
3. The evaluation assessed the overall quality of the *Bulletin* in the context of the current practices of counterpart agencies in the dissemination of external trade data, both outside and within the ESCWA region.
4. A brief general questionnaire was sent to 75 institutions; 20 selected international and regional organizations, relevant agencies, including National Statistical Offices, central banks, customs agencies and ministries of trade and commerce; and selected ESCWA staff members. The questionnaire sought information on the broad usage of the *Bulletin*, and asked respondents to rate it in several quality-related areas, such as relevance, coverage, timeliness, transparency and layout. Furthermore, 25 in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of agencies in order to obtain more detailed information on how the *Bulletin* was used, as well as to gain insights into good practices and future trends in trade statistics dissemination programmes.
5. In addition, a desk review of the websites of relevant international, regional and national agencies was undertaken in order to gain an appreciation of the extent of trade statistics dissemination and the types of vehicles used by other agencies.
6. In order to ensure transparency and objectivity, the evaluation exercise was carried out by an external consultant with statistics expertise and evaluation background. The complete report, which includes further details on the methodology used and the final outcomes, is annexed to this document.
7. In order to make use of the results of the self-evaluation under review, the ESCWA secretariat intends to apply the lessons learned to its other publications in the coming years.

II. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8. According to the questionnaire responses and the telephone interviews conducted, the *Bulletin* is most commonly used for reference, followed by research and other uses. However, around 20 per cent of questionnaire respondents did not use the *Bulletin* at all.
9. Among users, the *Bulletin* is mostly a secondary source of trade statistics, and only one-third of the questionnaire respondents rated it as a very relevant publication.
10. Several suggestions for improvement of *Bulletin* coverage were made. In addition, interviewees enthusiastically supported the idea of including various kinds of analytical content.
11. While the frequency of observations, the timeliness of the *Bulletin*, and its layout, formatting and typesetting drew very favourable overall ratings, there were often significant differences of opinion between different groups of respondents. For example, 57 per cent of all questionnaire respondents rated the *Bulletin's* layout, formatting and typesetting as very good. However, respondents' views diverged most widely on this issue: the top rating was given by 76 per cent of offices based in the ESCWA region, and only 11 per cent of those based elsewhere.

12. Concern was, however, widespread about the transparency of the *Bulletin* – the quality and utility of the metadata about the assumptions, methods and limitations of the statistics it contains. Only 16 per cent of questionnaire respondents found the *Bulletin* ‘very useful’ in this regard.

13. While the printed form in which the *Bulletin* is currently available was said to provide a degree of convenience, there was virtually unanimous support for electronic dissemination of its contents in various forms.

14. The review conducted on publications and databases relating to trade statistics disseminated by selected international, regional and national organizations has shown that there is a vast amount of trade data available, both in hard copy and electronic form. Although all the other United Nations regional commissions do include international trade statistics in one or more general-purpose statistical publications or databases, none of them have a dedicated recurrent trade statistics publication.

15. Based on findings concerning the use and relevance of the *Bulletin*, and the fact that the present printed format offers limited possibilities to address the significant shortcomings identified, it is recommended that the *Bulletin* in its current form be discontinued.

16. In the meantime, ESCWA is encouraged to give higher priority to the electronic dissemination of trade data, paying greater attention to the issues of coverage and transparency, and/or to consistently re-shape the current format of the *Bulletin*, following the strong demand for trade statistics by users.

17. According to the outcomes of the assessment, ESCWA should also continue to publish merchandise trade statistics in the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*, but should devote priority attention to improving the transparency of this section of the publication, including the cut-off date for the statistics published.

18. According to the recommendations made in the report, ESCWA should also take immediate steps to complete and populate the trade module of ESIS. Additionally, it is recommended that ESCWA should update and computerize the distribution lists for its statistical publications, and review its mailing arrangements. Finally, ESCWA should explore ways to satisfy the identified demand for trade-related analytical content through enhanced interdivisional collaboration within the secretariat, as well as through cooperation with other agencies.

III. ACTION REQUIRED

19. The Statistical Committee is invited to:

(a) Discuss the main findings and recommendations of the report, including use of the feedback and lessons learned for improving the quality of other ESCWA statistics publications;

(b) Take a decision with regard to the recommendation of discontinuing the *Bulletin* in its present format;

(c) Compare advantages and disadvantages of the alternative scenarios:

(i) Maintaining the ‘status quo’;

(ii) Re-shaping the current publication; and

(iii) Disseminating external trade data in electronic format only.

(d) Advise the secretariat on how the National Statistical Offices can contribute to improving specific quality dimensions of the current publication, particularly transparency, frequency of observations, and timeliness;

(e) Advise the secretariat on how the National Statistical Offices can provide support for updating the publication’s mailing distribution list.

Annex

ASSESSMENT OF THE STATISTICAL PUBLICATION

"External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region"

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by an external consultant engaged by the ESCWA secretariat.¹ The generous cooperation of those national and international officials who completed the general questionnaire is gratefully acknowledged, as are the time, patience and vital input of all those who were interviewed. The additional material submitted by several agencies in response to requests has also been most helpful.

The active collaboration and assistance of staff in the Statistics Division and Programme Planning and Technical Cooperation Division of ESCWA is also gratefully acknowledged.

Executive summary

In 2008 the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) decided to conduct an evaluation of its long-standing annual publication, *External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region*, which contains merchandise trade data for ESCWA member countries. The *Bulletin* is currently the main tool for the presentation of trade statistics, with some trade data also appearing in the annual *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*. The evaluation focused on the relevance and quality of the *Bulletin*, in order to enhance the cost-effective provision of trade data to stakeholders in the region. The purpose of this report is to advise the ESCWA Statistical Committee at its eighth session on the future of the *Bulletin* and future arrangements for the dissemination of trade statistics in the region.

The evaluation comprised four main activities:

- (a) Agreement on the Terms of Reference;
- (b) A desk review of the websites of relevant international, regional and national agencies (see appendix D), intended to gain an appreciation of the extent of trade statistics dissemination and the types of vehicles employed by other agencies;
- (c) Administration of a short general questionnaire (see appendix A) to 75 agencies, seeking information on the broad usage of the *Bulletin* and asking respondents to rate it in several categories;
- (d) Conduct of 25 in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of agencies (see appendix C), in order to obtain more detailed information on how the *Bulletin* was used, as well as to gain insight into good practices and future trends in trade statistics dissemination programmes.

The methodology adopted was intended to place the evaluation of the *Bulletin* in the context of the current practices of counterpart agencies both outside and within the ESCWA region, and to supplement the feedback from the questionnaires with a series of conversations which could contribute somewhat less structured and wider-ranging input to the assessment. While the website review generally went smoothly, problems with the *Bulletin's* distribution list and with mailing arrangements adversely affected the questionnaire response rate and the timely conduct of the interviews; substantial additional efforts were required to achieve reasonably satisfactory results.

¹ Mr. Andrew Flatt was hired as a consultant to conduct the evaluation. Mr. Flatt is currently a consultant in the field of statistics and project evaluation. He is the former Chief of the Statistics Division at UNESCAP.

The website review of agency publications and databases covered various aspects of trade statistics, including the broad type and level of detail of data, classifications used, geographic coverage and country groupings employed, types of analysis provided, length of time series, periodicity and timeliness of data, publication format and pricing policies – all in relation to the *Bulletin* in its current form. This phase of the assessment, which paid particular attention to the other regional commissions of the United Nations, revealed the very extensive volume of trade data that is available, both in hard copy and electronic form, as well as the high level of cooperation and coordination among supranational agencies in the collection and processing of international merchandise trade statistics. The review concluded that, with the possible exception of aggregate data on the ESCWA region, there is very little if any information in the *Bulletin* which is not available elsewhere; moreover, the *Bulletin* compares unfavourably in almost all the attributes studied, including volume and detail of data, periodicity and timeliness, and ease and flexibility of use. However, the practices of other agencies do provide many pointers on how ESCWA can improve its dissemination of trade statistics.

The findings from the 31 responses to the general questionnaire and the 25 telephone interviews were analysed together. Easily the most common use of the *Bulletin* was for reference, followed by research and other uses; however, around 20 per cent of questionnaire respondents made no use of the *Bulletin* at all. Among users, the *Bulletin* is mostly a secondary source of trade statistics, and only one-third of questionnaire respondents rated it as a very relevant publication. Many suggestions were offered on how the coverage of the *Bulletin* could be improved; in addition, interviewees enthusiastically supported the idea of including analytical content of various kinds. The frequency of observations, the timeliness of the *Bulletin*, and its layout, formatting and typesetting drew very favourable ratings overall, although there were often significant differences of opinion between different groups of respondents. Concern was, however, widespread about the transparency of the *Bulletin* – the quality and utility of the metadata about the assumptions, methods and limitations of the statistics it contains; only 16 per cent of questionnaire respondents found the *Bulletin* ‘very useful’ in this regard.

While the printed form in which the *Bulletin* is currently available was said to provide a degree of convenience, there was virtually unanimous support for electronic dissemination of its contents in various forms. On more general issues surrounding trade statistics, interviewees provided the evaluation with valuable information on their sources of trade statistics other than the *Bulletin*, the features including pricing policies of their own trade statistics dissemination programmes, and trends and issues likely to affect the dissemination of trade data in the future.

Conclusions and recommendations

Given the findings on the usage and relevance of the *Bulletin*, and the fact that the present printed format offers limited possibilities to address the significant deficiencies identified, it is recommended that the *Bulletin* in its current form be discontinued. However, there is strong demand for trade statistics generally, and the evaluation shows clearly that the future dissemination of trade statistics by ESCWA *must be electronically based*. It is recommended that ESCWA take priority steps to complete and populate the trade module of the ESCWA Statistical Information System, incorporating the assessment’s findings, making maximum use of existing databases, and paying particular attention to issues of coverage and transparency. While trade in services is not seen as a current priority, it is recommended that ESCWA explore ways to satisfy the identified desire for trade-related analytical content in order to add value to the trade statistics published.

To take advantage of the high level of inter-agency cooperation and goodwill in the field of trade statistics, it is recommended that ESCWA capitalize on the experience and expertise of other agencies in this field. Since monitoring and evaluation should be a continuing process, it is also recommended that ESCWA should periodically reassess its trade statistics dissemination programme and track the changing needs of data users. For the time being, that programme should continue to include the publication of merchandise trade statistics in the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*, with priority attention being paid to the

improvement of metadata. Additionally, it is recommended that ESCWA should update and computerize the distribution lists for its statistical publications, and review its mailing arrangements.

Finally, many stakeholders concluded that the evaluation of the *Bulletin* was timely, seeing both great scope and opportunity for ESCWA to improve its dissemination of trade data.

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2008 the Statistics Division of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) decided to conduct an internal self-evaluation of the publication *External Trade Bulletin of the ESCWA Region*.² The *Bulletin* contains data and indicators on the international merchandise trade of ESCWA member countries. It was first published in 1983 and in recent years has appeared annually, the sixteenth edition being issued in November 2007.

The evaluation aimed to focus on the relevance and quality of the *Bulletin*, using various measures of quality as well as a comparison with trade statistics publications and other dissemination tools produced by other agencies. Simply put, the future of the *Bulletin* is the key issue to be determined by the assessment. The ultimate purpose of the evaluation exercise is to improve cost-effective provision of trade data to stakeholders in the ESCWA region.

II. METHODOLOGY AND CONDUCT OF THE EVALUATION

After preparatory work by the ESCWA secretariat, a consultant was commissioned to assist with the evaluation. The evaluation comprised four main activities: finalization of the Terms of Reference, website review, questionnaire administration, and telephone interviews.

The terms of reference for the evaluation were first discussed and finalized, along with the main methods and tools to be used. These included introductory letters and a questionnaire, in both English and Arabic, and an outline script for telephone interviews.

A desk review was conducted of the websites of around 25 international and regional organizations (see appendix D), and (where websites were accessible) of selected statistical and other agencies of all ESCWA member countries. The purpose of the review was to gain a brief appreciation of the extent of external trade statistics dissemination and the types of dissemination vehicles employed, in relation to the *External Trade Bulletin*. In some cases, the website review was supplemented by requests to individual agencies for additional material (mainly in the form of CDs and pdf files).

A short general questionnaire (see appendix A) was enclosed with copies of the latest (16th) edition of the *External Trade Bulletin* and mailed to 20 selected international and regional organizations, relevant agencies (national statistical offices, central banks, customs agencies, and ministries of trade and commerce) of all 13 ESCWA member countries,³ and selected ESCWA staff members. In all, 75 questionnaires and copies of the *Bulletin* were distributed. The general questionnaire sought information on the usage of the *Bulletin* and asked respondents to rate its relevance, coverage, periodicity of data, accuracy, timeliness, transparency and general presentation.

Problems were experienced with the mail-out stage of the questionnaire administration. The distribution list for the *Bulletin*, although extending to well over 1000 entries, was of limited utility as it was found to be both out of date and incomplete; it failed, for example, to cover several international and regional

² United Nations publication, Sales No. A/E.07.III.8.

³ The acceptance of Sudan, 14th member of ESCWA, was approved by ECOSOC at its 2008 session (New York, July 2008), while the data collection distribution of general questionnaire to member countries was in early June 2008.

agencies which might have been expected to receive the *Bulletin* under customary inter-agency exchange agreements. Furthermore, in numerous instances the *Bulletin* and questionnaire apparently failed to reach their intended recipients. This adversely affected not only the level of questionnaire responses but also the subsequent telephone interviews. Eventually, after strenuous follow-up efforts and some re-mailings by the ESCWA secretariat, a questionnaire response rate of 40 per cent was achieved.

Telephone interviews of a sample of international, regional and national agencies were conducted, starting about three weeks after the distribution of the *Bulletin* and general questionnaire. The target was to reach about one-third of the intended recipients of the *Bulletin*, with some over-representation of international and regional agencies, and including an agency (often the statistical office) in each ESCWA member country. The telephone interviews were designed to elicit more detailed information on the usage of the *Bulletin* and additional topics on which users might want trade information, and more generally to gain insight into good practices in trade statistics dissemination programmes and future trends and issues in the dissemination of trade statistics. It was recognized that not all questions were relevant to a number of the agencies interviewed.

The interview phase of the evaluation provided the first indication that a number of copies of the *Bulletin* and questionnaire had gone astray. This led to the postponement of many of the interviews and, in some cases, selection of another agency to be interviewed. Eventually a total of 25 interviews were conducted, lasting on average 25 minutes (see appendix C for a list of the offices contacted).

III. TRADE STATISTICS DISSEMINATION PRACTICES IN OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

A review was conducted of publications and databases relating to trade statistics disseminated by selected international, regional and national organizations, including those mentioned in the TOR. Several aspects of trade statistics were briefly examined, including the broad type of data published, the level of detail, the classifications and other breakdowns used, the geographic coverage of data, the country groupings used, the types of analysis provided by the publishing organization, the length of time series, the periodicity of the data available, and their timeliness. The form in which the data were made available and the access and pricing policies were also briefly studied.

This review concentrated on the type of trade data published by the ESCWA *Bulletin*, namely, data on international merchandise trade in goods. However, there is also a growing volume of data available on international trade in services. This question is revisited under the findings from the questionnaire and interview responses.

There is a very extensive volume of trade data available, both in hard copy and electronic form. All the agencies reviewed publish trade statistics in some form or another, although in some cases only summary data are available in a general-purpose statistical yearbook, abstract or compendium. Several major supranational agencies, however, have dedicated dissemination vehicles for trade in goods statistics, both in printed publication and electronic form.

It should be mentioned at the outset that many agencies are using, at least partially, common source data for their trade statistics dissemination programmes. In particular, the Comtrade (Commodity Trade Statistics) database operated by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) and the International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade (DOT) Statistics database are drawn on by many organizations, including ESCWA. Also to be noted is the high level of cooperation and coordination among agencies in the primary collection from countries and the subsequent processing of international merchandise trade statistics; this process is overseen and facilitated by the Inter-agency Task Force on International Merchandise Trade Statistics. The World Trade Organization convenes the Task Force and maintains its website (see appendix D); the Task Force's objectives include, relevantly, the coordination of data dissemination through the

agencies' databases and publications in order to foster the coherence of international merchandise trade statistics and to better serve the user community.⁴

The types of merchandise trade flow on which data are published are basically standard: imports, exports, re-exports (sometimes included in exports), and (occasionally) re-imports. The ESCWA *Bulletin* additionally shows, in selected tables, total trade (imports plus exports) and balance of trade. These aggregates occasionally appear in the publications of other agencies, and can be constructed by users downloading data from electronic databases.

In terms of detailed trade statistics, the most disaggregated data published in the ESCWA *Bulletin* are at the 2-digit level of the Harmonized System (HS), covering 21 categories (plus unspecified). This level of detail is matched by many organizations and surpassed by some, data for most ESCWA countries being available at the 6-digit level of the HS. Further, other agencies publish data on most ESCWA countries according to the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) and/or the Classification by Broad Economic Categories (BEC).⁵ Naturally, disaggregated data are also found in the publications or databases of ESCWA member countries themselves, although there are differences in the level of detail available. Additionally, agencies frequently publish data on the (10, 20 etc) most important commodities imported and exported, information which is not available in the ESCWA *Bulletin*.

The coverage by global agencies of ESCWA countries in terms of merchandise trade statistics varies, but is generally quite comprehensive - Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territory being the members most often missing. While occasional or casual users may benefit from the convenience of consulting the printed *Bulletin*, the overall conclusion is that users seeking trade data on individual ESCWA countries are generally able to find more detailed and comprehensive information from global agencies than from the ESCWA *Bulletin*.

This does not hold true, however, for prepared aggregate data on the ESCWA region as a whole. While it is possible, though in some cases slightly laborious, for the user to construct merchandise trade totals for the ESCWA region by combining the individual country data, this review did not find any other agency which published data for the total ESCWA region as a grouping. The international agencies studied in fact employ a wide variety of geographical aggregates covering, to some extent or other, ESCWA member countries; agencies frequently combine ESCWA and non-ESCWA member countries into aggregates entitled 'Near East', 'Middle East' and the like. Even a regional grouping labelled 'Western Asia' can be misleading in this context, since the standard geo-nomenclature used by the United Nations Statistics Division⁶ defines Western Asia as 12 ESCWA member countries (Egypt being classified in Northern Africa) plus Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Georgia, Israel and Turkey.

While some agencies reviewed restrict themselves to publishing merchandise trade data, others supplement these with analysis or commentary of different sorts, at least in some of their trade statistics output. The analyses can be in the form of textual commentary on trends in trade, derived indicators from raw trade data, and so on, and are sometimes produced through joint efforts of the statistical and economic analysis divisions of the agencies in question. The ESCWA *Bulletin* currently contains data supplemented by a few graphs.

With the exception of the graphs, which go back to 1980, the *Bulletin* contains time series for a maximum of ten years. This is not out of line with other printed publications, although some use the equivalent space to show, say, the last five years, with earlier data for decadal and/or mid-decadal years

⁴ E/CN.3/2008/18, p. 9.

⁵ The classifications are referred to here generically. In fact, some organizations provide the user with a choice of the version of classification, e.g., HS 2002, SITC Rev.3, in which data are available.

⁶ Standard Country or Area Codes for Statistical Use, Revision 4 (United Nations publication, Sales No. 98.XVII.9).

(1980, 1985 etc). Agencies with databases often provide much longer time series, depending of course on underlying data availability.

In terms of periodicity or frequency of observations, annual data, such as appear in the ESCWA *Bulletin*, are the most frequently found among the agencies reviewed. However, the organizations with the largest dissemination programmes generally make data available on a monthly and, to a lesser extent, quarterly basis also. Timeliness of data among the various printed publications reviewed was difficult to assess, but it is obvious that electronic publishing provides the opportunity to make data available much more rapidly than in printed form. Even posting an electronic (e.g. pdf) version of a publication on the agency website can provide data months before the printed copy appears.

Trade data published by ESCWA, whether in the *Bulletin* itself or in the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*⁷ are (at the time of evaluation) available only in hard copy form. All the other international agencies reviewed have at least some data available in electronic form. Electronic dissemination takes various guises, for example, access to the tabular database from which a printed publication is produced, a CD-ROM, files downloadable into Excel, and so on. Several agencies including those with the largest trade data holdings operate databases from which users can create their own tables; many of these data holdings cover all or almost all ESCWA countries. However, with one exception among those reviewed, all the international agencies continue to publish some trade statistics in hard copy form alongside their electronic offerings.

With regard to data access and pricing policies of the various international agencies disseminating merchandise trade statistics, a reasonably common model emerges. All agencies reviewed allow some free access to their electronic data holdings.⁸ However, several agencies (including most of the largest) levy a charge on certain heavy users of the trade databases. The charging regimes differ: by volume of data downloaded, by type of user (government agencies generally have free access), by the user's location (for example, a smaller or no charge for those in developing countries), and so on. With a few exceptions, international agencies do charge for trade statistics disseminated on physical media (CDs or printed publications), often on a cost-recovery basis, but in all cases there is a free distribution list to government agencies and the like. Like other departments of the United Nations Secretariat, ESCWA is bound by a similar model, whereby sales of printed publications are handled by the Sales Sections in New York and Geneva.

Special attention was paid in the review to the other regional commissions of the United Nations. None currently has a dedicated recurrent trade statistics publication. *Foreign Trade Statistics of Asia and the Pacific* was last published by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in 2003, having been dropped in a secretariat-wide exercise to reduce the number of printed publications. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) produced a series entitled the *Compendium of Intra-African and Related Trade Statistics*, but discontinued it in 2005; consideration is soon to be given to its possible reinstatement.

However, all the regional commissions do include international trade statistics in one or more general-purpose statistical publications or databases. (ESCWA is no exception in this regard, devoting 35 pages of the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region* to foreign trade statistics). The ESCAP *Statistical Yearbook* has recently changed format and now includes some analytical commentary to accompany its data offerings, including those on international merchandise trade. In the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) the foreign trade coverage in the database has been restricted to a few series in the context of national accounts

⁷ United Nations publication, Sales No. A/E.07/II.L.3.

⁸ The Global Trade Atlas, not formally reviewed but cited by a few agencies as a source of international merchandise trade data, is, however, a purely commercial operation.

and balance of payments. ECA's *African Statistical Yearbook* covers foreign trade in both its summary and country tables.

In terms of print publications the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has arguably the most extensive coverage, and in addition maintains two systems related to international merchandise trade statistics. BADECEL is a database allowing the user to choose import and export data from 26 ECLAC countries over a 35-year time period, while partner countries include all ESCWA members; tabulations are downloadable into html or Excel. SIGCI is a system with graphical features allowing the user to select various series including total exports, imports and balance of trade for about 70 countries (many outside the ECLAC membership), direction of trade, top 300 exports for a recent year, and matrices of trade flows at the subregional bloc level. These systems, although currently available only in Spanish, could reward careful study for possible adaptation in the ESCWA context.

National websites in the ESCWA region were also reviewed briefly for their coverage of merchandise trade statistics. As might be expected, they vary significantly in terms of volume and detail of information available, its timeliness and periodicity, and the general accessibility and user-friendliness of the website. Some websites were quite advanced, in one case allowing users to generate their own tables in the manner of some international agencies. Another point of interest was that a couple of countries had ceased to publish print publications, relying instead on their websites to disseminate trade statistics.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from this phase of the assessment is that there is very little if any information published in the ESCWA *Bulletin* which is not available elsewhere, often in greater detail and with a choice of classification, with longer time series, more frequent periodicity, better timeliness, and in more flexible forms suitable for further analysis. The review of other agencies also provides many pointers on how ESCWA can improve its trade statistics dissemination practices.

IV. ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE AND INTERVIEW RESPONSES

In addition to examining overall responses to the questions posed, the responses to the general questionnaire were grouped for analytical purposes along two overlapping dimensions:

- (a) Supranational agencies (including those based in the ESCWA region) versus national offices;
- (b) Agencies based outside the ESCWA region, versus agencies and offices based within it.

Because of the relatively small number of questionnaires returned, the analyses made must be interpreted with caution. The grouped questionnaire responses are shown graphically in appendix B.

In terms of usage of the *Bulletin*, some 58 per cent of those responding to the general questionnaire indicated that they used it for reference, 15 per cent (all based in the ESCWA region) for research, while other uses were cited by only 7 per cent of questionnaire respondents. However, 20 per cent indicated that they did not use the *Bulletin* at all. It may be inferred that this percentage would be higher if those who did not respond to the questionnaire had been included, since non-users might see little point in completing and returning the questionnaire. Indeed, even among those who returned the questionnaire and who were subsequently interviewed, a number indicated that they were seeing the *Bulletin* for the first time.

For those who did use the *Bulletin*, it appeared to be very much a secondary source of trade statistics; no interviewee could be found for whom the *Bulletin* was the primary, let alone the sole, source of merchandise trade data for the ESCWA region and its constituent countries.

These findings on usage are to some extent reflected in the questionnaire responses about the relevance of the *Bulletin* to their needs. While respondents were, perhaps understandably, reluctant to

ascribe a lack of relevance to the publication (even when they did not use it), it was described as ‘very relevant’ by only one-third.

The types of uses to which the *Bulletin* was being put varied, predictably, by the type of agency, and even within the agency depending on differing needs for analysis and research. Uses cited most frequently included the cross-checking of data against those from other sources, and comparison by countries of their own data with those of others. A number of ESCWA member countries which indicated that they used the *Bulletin* for reference seemed only to employ it to compare the *Bulletin* figures with those that the country had sent to ESCWA in the first place – hardly a productive use.

Beyond the types of use for the *Bulletin* overall, it was difficult to glean information on particular sections, tables or features that users found particularly helpful. It was, however, reasonably clear that most users placed more importance on the data for individual countries than on the aggregates for the ESCWA region (which, in any case, tend to be incomplete for later years). This throws into question the value of the aggregate data on the region which are one of the *Bulletin*’s few unique features.

Both during the interviews and on the questionnaire, many agencies and national offices offered suggestions on coverage and content which they felt would improve the *Bulletin*, as well as providing comments about drawbacks and difficulties with the coverage (and other aspects) of the *Bulletin* in its current format. In fact, the issue of coverage drew the second highest number of questionnaire comments (after the issue of transparency) in the ratings section, and these sometimes spilled over into more general observations and suggestions on the *Bulletin*. Similarly, respondents who were interviewed offered several suggestions when asked whether there were additional statistics on merchandise trade in the ESCWA region which they would like to see appear in the *Bulletin*. Despite the number of comments and suggestions, it was difficult to discern common themes among them concerning coverage per se, other than perhaps requests from agencies for more information on oil exports, including by destination, and for a distinction between exports and re-exports (requests which it may not be easy for ESCWA to fulfill), and suggestions from countries that the data be presented according to different classifications. Overall, only 23 per cent of questionnaire respondents viewed the *Bulletin* as having very comprehensive coverage, with almost all the rest opting for the ‘somewhat comprehensive’ rating.

Linked to the question of coverage, interviewees were also asked whether the *Bulletin* should attempt to cover international trade in services. Most national offices and some agencies were cautiously positive in this regard, citing it as an area of growing importance and interest. However, it was pointed out in some instances that trade in services was handled by an office different from the interviewee’s, and more crucially that these types of statistics were relatively difficult to collect, with data availability in ESCWA countries still quite limited.

Almost all interviewees reacted positively to a suggestion that the *Bulletin* should include some analytical content to supplement the data and charts currently presented, feeling that this would add significant value to the publication. In addition, several questionnaire respondents volunteered similar views when providing suggestions on how the *Bulletin* might be improved. A variety of types of analysis were mentioned, including textual commentary on trade patterns and key trends, and the calculation of indicators and indices (unit value and volume indices, export and geographic concentration indices, export performance indicators, etc.).

Over 90 per cent of questionnaire respondents reported that the current (annual) frequency of observations in the *Bulletin* was satisfactory. However, it should be noted that, along with timeliness, this question forced a starker choice on respondents, the alternatives to ‘satisfactory’ being ‘not satisfactory’ or ‘no opinion’. In fact, despite the very high satisfaction rating, a number of countries commented that ESCWA should work towards publishing quarterly or at least semi-annual data, which was recognized to involve close cooperation with the countries themselves. This issue was somewhat confounded in the questionnaire responses with that of timeliness, with countries tending to repeat their comments about

quarterly or semi-annual data. Compared with frequency of observations, however, more respondents (17 per cent overall) were willing to express their dissatisfaction about timeliness; interestingly, it is the one issue on which national offices gave a more negative appraisal than did agencies.

The issue of accuracy of data, defined in the questionnaire as the difference between the data published in successive issues of the *Bulletin* for the same year, drew a mixed response. Thirty-seven per cent of respondents overall, and fully two-thirds of agencies based outside the ESCWA region, recorded no opinion on this issue, often (as the comments noted) because it was the first time that they were studying the *Bulletin*. Among those giving an opinion, the rating 'somewhat accurate' was the most common.

The transparency of the *Bulletin* - the quality and utility of the metadata about the assumptions, methods and limitations of the statistics it contains - drew the largest number of comments of any issue, and also figured prominently in the interview discussions. Most of the comments came from agencies, but several national offices also expressed concerns in this area. Common criticisms included a lack of sufficient detail in the metadata, inadequate clarification of the trade systems used by countries, a failure to identify the constituent countries of certain groupings ('other developed economies', 'major oil exporters', and so on), and other assorted problems with geo-nomenclature. A majority of agencies based outside the ESCWA region found the *Bulletin* to be not very useful or not at all useful on the issue of transparency, and overall, a mere 13 per cent of questionnaire respondents pronounced the *Bulletin* to be 'very useful' in this area, the lowest score given to the top rating among any of the issues surveyed.

By contrast, 57 per cent of all questionnaire respondents rated the *Bulletin's* layout, formatting and typesetting as very good. This issue, though, produced the widest divergence of views among the respondents: the top rating was given by 76 per cent of offices based in the ESCWA region, and only 11 per cent of those based elsewhere. While national offices generally praised the presentational aspects of the *Bulletin*, agencies were not so complimentary: the terms 'old-fashioned' and 'unimpressive' were among those used, presumably reflecting different perceptions and standards in these fields.

While being based, of necessity, on the hard copy *Bulletin*, the evaluation also attempted to assess the dissemination format in which users would prefer to have the information it contained. Several respondents noted that the printed publication provided a degree of convenience, especially for the occasional user, and was also more in tune with the work culture in some countries. However, there was virtually unanimous support for electronic dissemination, in various forms - CD or DVD, a web version of the *Bulletin* content, a website with interactive database of trade statistics, and so on. Among the many advantages of electronic dissemination cited, were significantly increased ease of use for researchers and analysts wishing to work further with the data; ability to provide a greater volume of information (longer time series, more detailed commodity breakdown, etc.); an improvement in timeliness and, possibly, frequency of data; and greater possibility of finding out who users are.

Beyond their views on the ESCWA *Bulletin* itself, interviewees were also asked a series of more general questions about their use of trade statistics and their own trade statistics dissemination programmes. Concerning sources of trade statistics other than those which they themselves collected, the most frequently cited by both agencies and national offices were Comtrade and IMF's DOT, and in the case of national offices in the ESCWA region, Eurostat's COMEXT (reference database containing external trade statistics) also. Among other sources of data on countries in the ESCWA region, the *Annual Statistical Bulletin* published by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the *Arab Unified Economic Report*, various reports from the Islamic Centre for Development of Trade (ICDT), and the *Statistical Bulletin* published by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were mentioned; at least some of these sources are available in electronic form.

These sources were typically used by agencies in their own trade statistics compilation and dissemination programmes, and in some cases as the basis for analytical and research work. National offices

generally used the sources to check their own data and those of partner countries, particularly in mirror statistics exercises.

The interviews also sought confirmatory and additional information on the dissemination programmes of the agencies and national offices contacted, and on their data access and pricing policies. As noted earlier, a large number publish merchandise trade data in both hard copy and electronic form, although in a few cases regular hard copy publication has ceased. Although not all those interviewed could provide information on numbers of printed publications or on website access and downloads (this usually being the responsibility of another department), it was possible to discern some trends. It is clear that the 'markets' for printed publications and electronic data vary, with hard copies being more suited for libraries and some sections of the general public. Electronic access in general was rising, in some cases quite rapidly. Experience with printed publications varied; numbers tended to be in decline for high-frequency (e.g., quarterly) publications and when the data were replicated in pdf version on the website, but in other cases print runs were holding up or even increasing, alongside electronic products. Nevertheless, the longer term downward trend in hard copy publications is clear; a survey by UNSD in 1997 had reviewed some 71 publications on trade statistics.⁹ The exact scope of that survey is not known, but the number currently being published is obviously far fewer.

Detailed and specific information (for example, from user surveys and feedback mechanisms) on the uses to which trade statistics were being put was rather hard to come by, with some offices both at international and national level having little more than an impressionistic idea of the types of use - market research and economic analysis were perhaps most frequently mentioned. Possibly as a consequence, several respondents recorded no notable trends in user interest in recent years, with national offices in particular indicating that requests tended to be general and broad-ranging. However, more than one agency reported increased interest in data on trade in services, particularly at lower levels of detail, and on regional trading arrangements (though not necessarily in the ESCWA region).

Interviewees were also asked for their thoughts on the dissemination of trade statistics in the future, and for information on planned changes to their own organization's trade statistics dissemination programme. While many of the responses were, understandably, agency-specific, a few themes and trends of common relevance emerged. Some agencies are considering reducing the periodicity or size of their printed publications, while several are actively engaged in improving the functionality of their trade databases - in some cases working towards data warehouses from which a variety of data could be disseminated. Similarly, several organizations, particularly national offices, are working on redesigning their websites and building in improved features, including more detailed commodity statistics and facilities for users to download data. It was widely recognized that the Internet gave ample opportunities to package trade information, aiming among other things to make it more easily digestible and 'on tap' for the general public. A trend was also seen towards the establishment of global portals for trade statistics and information, and it was suggested that ESCWA might wish to develop a regional version.

Respondents, at least among the agencies, also noted a trend towards the dissemination of trade information rather than statistics per se, in order to provide users with added value from the data. To this end, some agencies are planning on introducing or improving analytical material, including various trade indicators. Of emerging importance among these are the development and eventual dissemination of a range of impact indicators, measuring the effect of trade on phenomena such as employment and migration. Trade forecasts are also seen as a possible future area of work.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted earlier, the overall conclusion from the website review of other agencies and national offices is that there is very little information published in the ESCWA *Bulletin* which cannot be found elsewhere.

⁹ E/CN.3/1997/24, p. 11.

Moreover, in relation to the data published by other agencies, the *Bulletin* compares unfavourably in almost all the attributes studied, among them volume and detail of data, periodicity and timeliness, and ease and flexibility of use.

The questionnaire and interview responses showed that the *Bulletin*, while enjoying a degree of usage, was inevitably a secondary source of information, and the proportion of questionnaire respondents citing the *Bulletin* as very relevant was relatively low. Furthermore, those contacted found significant deficiencies in certain aspects of the *Bulletin* as currently published.

Overall, there is little if any evidence that the *Bulletin* in its current form is a vital document on which users depend for important work; at best, it falls into the 'nice-to-have' category. Moreover, the current hard copy format offers very little possibility to address the improvements that are needed.

Recommendation 1: The *Bulletin* in its current form should be discontinued.

However, it is clear that there is strong demand for trade statistics generally and it would be unthinkable for ESCWA to cease publication in this field. The review of other agencies, as well as feedback and suggestions from questionnaire and interview respondents, provide many pointers on how ESCWA can improve its trade statistics dissemination practices.

The assessment has shown conclusively that the future dissemination of trade statistics by ESCWA must be electronically based. Adoption of electronic formats would provide the platform for improving the satisfaction of users in several areas, including coverage and detail, timeliness, and ease of use for analysis and research. In addition to the advantages cited by questionnaire and interview respondents, electronic dissemination would potentially allow a far greater user audience to be reached (provided access is free), and would generally convey the impression of a more forward-looking organization.

ESCWA is currently developing the ESCWA Statistical Information System (ESIS), which allows users to select statistics or indicators in several sectors and categories/subcategories. The selection can be made for all 13 ESCWA members as well as for certain other countries, ESCWA as a whole, and a number of country groupings; and for a range of time periods including individual years from 1980 up to 2006. The resulting tabulations can be downloaded into Excel, and definitions and metadata are available. The extent to which ESIS is currently populated with data is not known, but a number of sector modules, including trade, are under construction at the time of writing.

Recommendation 2: ESCWA should take immediate steps to complete and populate the trade module of ESIS, incorporating the findings of this assessment to the extent that is technically feasible. In populating the module, ESCWA should maximize use of existing trade databases developed by other agencies.

The two aspects of the current *Bulletin* that require the most urgent attention are coverage and transparency. Although there was little consensus on directions for the expansion of coverage beyond those noted in paragraph ..., such as the classification of data other than in the Harmonized System, the adoption of an electronic format will in principle permit the dissemination of a far wider range of merchandise trade data than is currently possible. The metadata currently published in the *Bulletin* were found seriously lacking in several areas, including the level of detail and geographical definitions; again, an electronic format will address any space limitations found in the current print version.

Recommendation 3: In designing the trade module of ESIS, ESCWA should pay priority attention to the issues of coverage and transparency.

The assessment has demonstrated a widespread interest in adding value to the merchandise trade data being published through various types of commentary and quantitative analysis; the review has noted examples in some agencies. This type of work typically involves both statisticians and economic analysts.

Recommendation 4: ESCWA should explore ways to satisfy the identified desire for trade-related analytical content through enhanced interdivisional collaboration within the secretariat as well as through cooperation with other agencies.

The assessment has also noted that there is some interest in extending the *Bulletin's* coverage to trade in services, which is considered an area of increasing importance. However, given that data in this field is at an early stage of development in many countries, and is often beyond the purview of the national statistical office, it is concluded that this should not be a current priority area.

The level of inter-agency cooperation in the field of trade statistics is high and very well established, and during the assessment a considerable degree of interest and goodwill was expressed by other agencies in respect of efforts made by ESCWA to revitalise its merchandise trade data dissemination. It appears that ample opportunities exist for ESCWA to benefit from greater inter-agency cooperation, especially in the areas of database sharing and management and the harmonization of primary data collection from countries (which in any event will need to be reviewed upon discontinuation of the *Bulletin*).

Recommendation 5: ESCWA should continue its active participation in the inter-agency Task Force on International Merchandise Trade Statistics, and should further capitalize on the experience and expertise of other agencies in this field.

ESCWA does not appear to have made any concerted attempt to evaluate the *Bulletin* in the past. The secretariat's efforts to disseminate trade statistics should be monitored and evaluated periodically, alongside continued analysis of trends.

Recommendation 6: ESCWA should reassess its trade statistics dissemination programme after, say, 3 to 4 years, and use techniques such as online questionnaires to track the changing needs of data users.

As noted earlier, many regional and other agencies publish foreign trade statistics in general statistical compendiums, and the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region* contains several tables on the topic. With a few exceptions, the data and tables are drawn from, or have the same source as, the *Bulletin*, and presumably suffer from many of the same limitations in terms of metadata. Although the timescale of the recommended conversion to electronic dissemination cannot be accurately determined, it is quite likely that it will not have been completed by the next scheduled issue of the *Statistical Abstract*.

Recommendation 7: ESCWA should continue to publish merchandise trade statistics in the *Statistical Abstract of the ESCWA Region*, while also devoting priority attention to improving the metadata in this section of the publication, including the cut-off date for the statistics published.

It is assumed that a print version of the *Statistical Abstract* will continue to be issued. The experience of assessing the *Bulletin* revealed that the distribution list was seriously incomplete and outdated, and that many copies were failing to reach their destination.

Recommendation 8: ESCWA should update and computerize the distribution lists for its statistical publications, and to the extent possible review its mailing arrangements.

In conclusion, it is believed that the review and assessment of the *Bulletin* are timely, as many of those contacted noted that there was both great scope and opportunity to effect improvements in the way that ESCWA disseminates trade statistics.

Appendix A

GENERAL QUESTIONNAIRE

ESCWA External Trade Bulletin

Introduction:

ESCWA has decided to undertake an evaluation of the External Trade Bulletin, in order to ascertain its relevance and usefulness to end-users. An additional aim of the evaluation is to identify ways of improving the quality of the publication of trade data in the ESCWA region.

Please note that as part of this Evaluation you may be contacted by an ESCWA Consultant for a more detailed evaluation of the Bulletin.

It would be particularly helpful if you could provide as much information as possible, utilizing the Comments sections in the questionnaire. Your response will be treated confidentially and will be reviewed and combined with other responses as part of the Assessment. The result of this Assessment will be shared with you.

Upon completion, kindly email, fax or mail the duly filled questionnaire to the following address by **15 June 2008** to:

Ms. Amal Nicola
P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square
Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: +961 1 978 465
Fax: +961 1 981 510 (Attention Ms Nicola, Statistics Division)
E-mail: nicola@un.org

Thank you for your cooperation and the valuable information you will provide by completing this survey.

Please identify yourself:

Name: _____
Position: _____
Organization: _____
Address: _____
Telephone: _____
Fax: _____
Email: _____

1. How do you use the Bulletin? (Please tick all boxes that apply)

Research Reference Other uses, please describe below

I don't use the Bulletin

I know others who do use the Bulletin, please give details (*name, contact details*):

2. How do you rate the Bulletin?

Issue	Evaluation
<p>Relevance of the Bulletin</p> <p><i>Refers to the degree to which data in the Bulletin provide information that meets your needs</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very relevant <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> somewhat relevant</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not very relevant</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not relevant at all</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Coverage of the Bulletin</p> <p><i>Refers to geographical coverage and time span over which data in the Bulletin are presented. It also refers to choice of tables and charts as well as content and level of detail in tables</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very comprehensive <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> somewhat comprehensive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not very comprehensive</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not comprehensive at all</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Frequency of observations</p> <p><i>Refers to the periodicity of observation - currently annual, could possibly be quarterly or monthly</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not satisfactory</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Accuracy of data</p> <p><i>Refers to the difference between the data published in successive issues of the Bulletin for the same year</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> very accurate <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> somewhat accurate</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not very accurate</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not accurate at all</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Timeliness of the Bulletin</p> <p><i>Refers to the length of time between the reference period of the information and when the Bulletin delivers the data</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> not satisfactory</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

Issue	Evaluation
<p>Transparency of the Bulletin</p> <p><i>Refers to the documentation (metadata) about the assumptions, methods and limitations of the data contained in the Bulletin</i></p>	<p> <input type="checkbox"/> very useful <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion <input type="checkbox"/> somewhat useful <input type="checkbox"/> not very useful <input type="checkbox"/> not useful at all </p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____</p>
<p>Layout, formatting and typesetting</p> <p><i>Refers to the printing quality, presentation, readability and ease of use of the Bulletin</i></p>	<p> <input type="checkbox"/> very good <input type="checkbox"/> no opinion <input type="checkbox"/> somewhat good <input type="checkbox"/> not very good <input type="checkbox"/> not good at all </p> <p>Comments: _____ _____ _____</p>

3. Do you have suggestions for improving the Bulletin?

Comments: _____

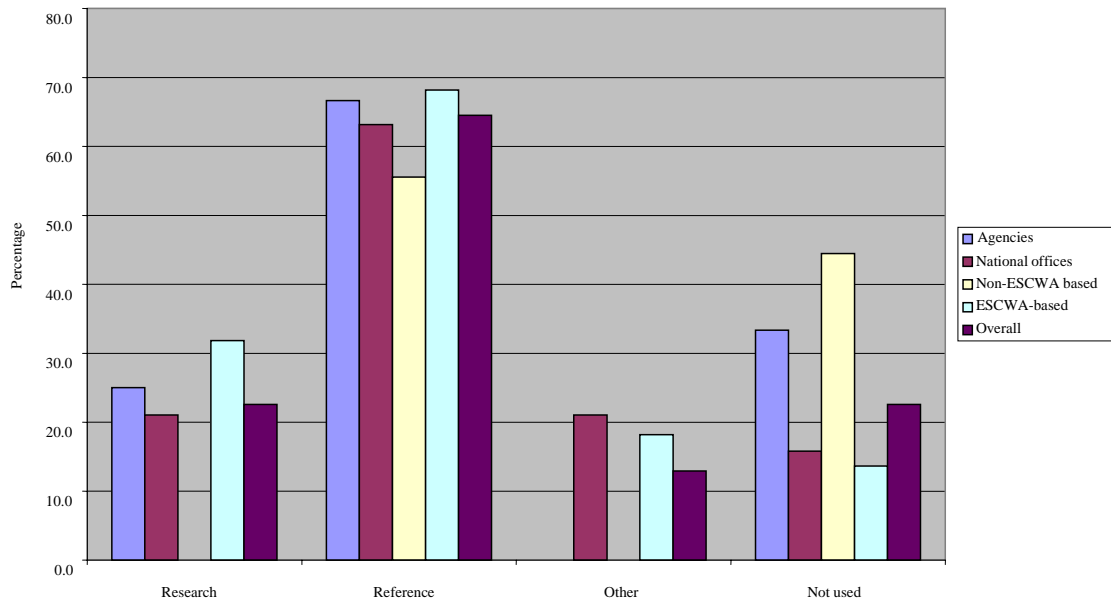
Thank you again for your time and attention in completing this questionnaire.

Appendix B

GRAPHIC SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

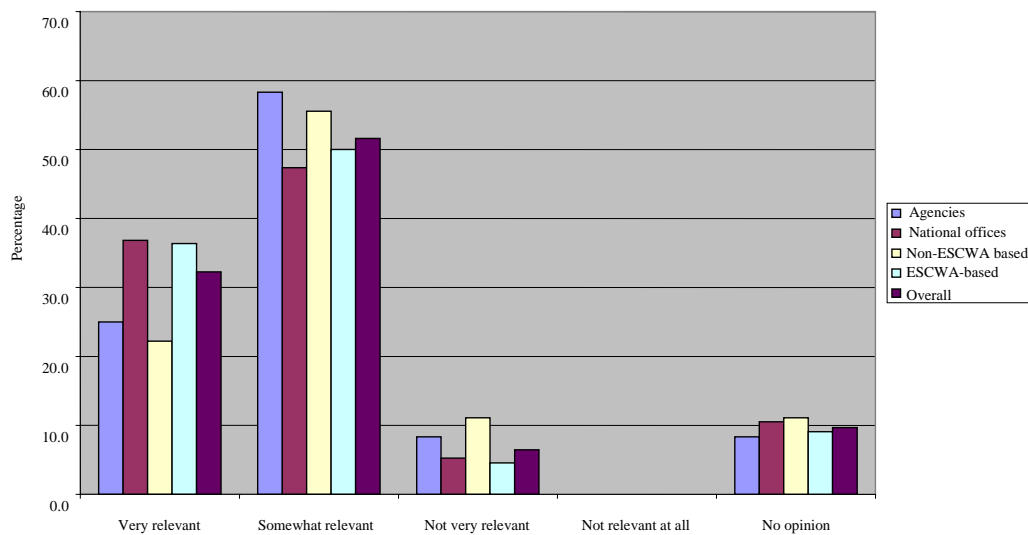
For the following analysis, questionnaire respondents have been categorized in two ways: supranational agencies versus national offices, and agencies based outside the ESCWA region versus agencies and offices within it.

Usage of the Bulletin

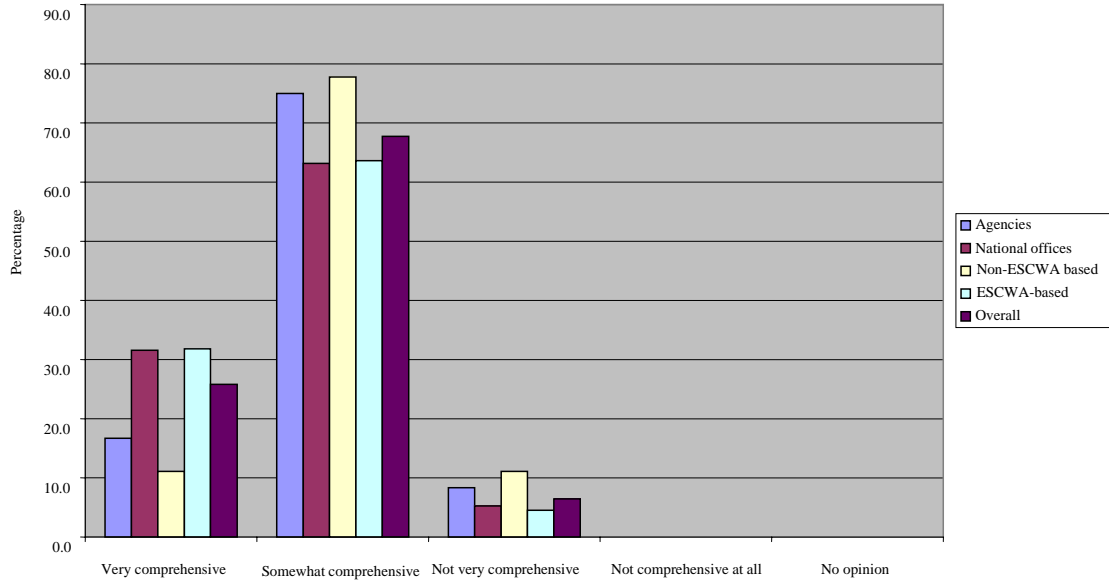


(Multiple uses were permitted for the above question).

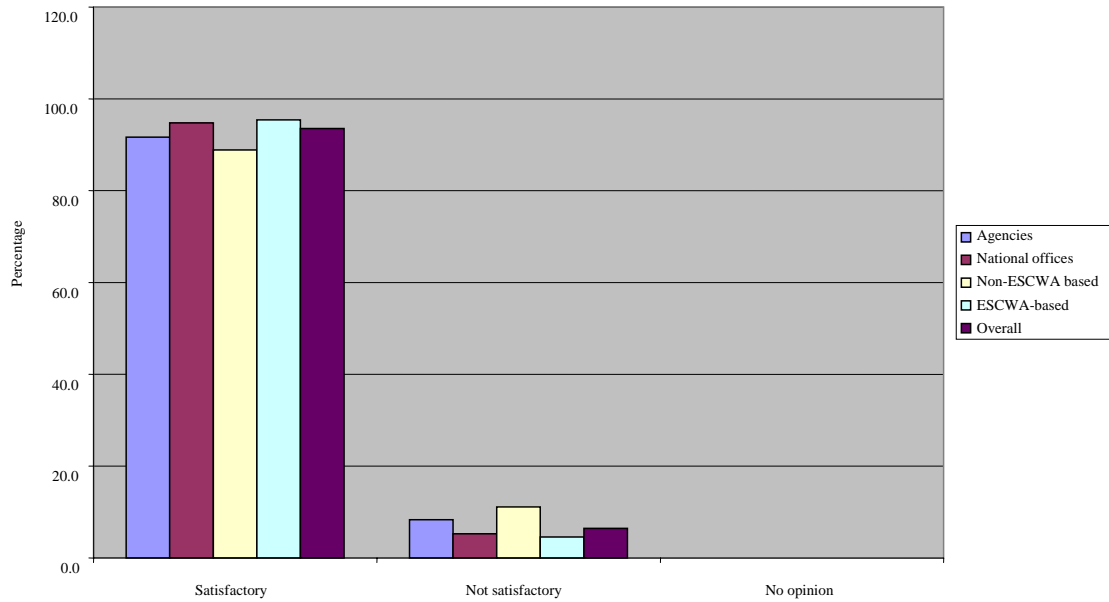
Relevance of the Bulletin



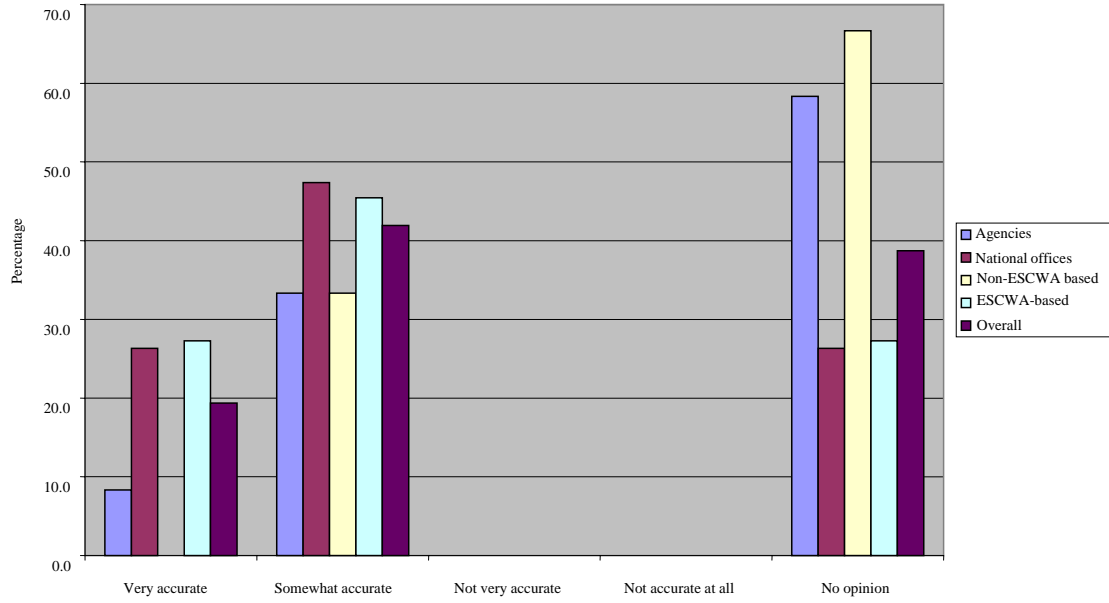
Coverage of the Bulletin



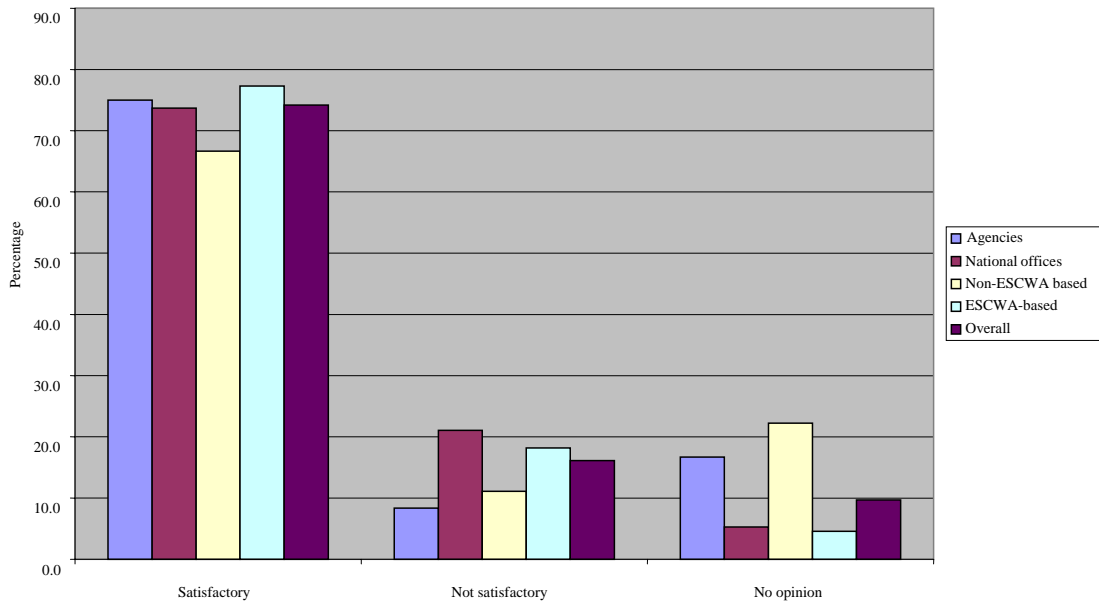
Frequency of observations



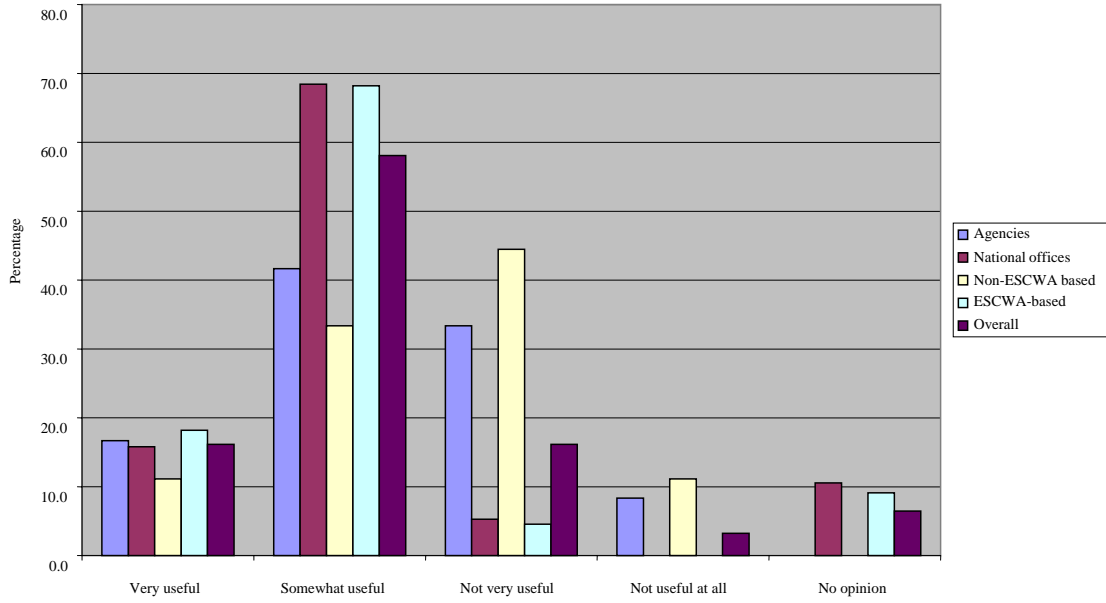
Accuracy of data



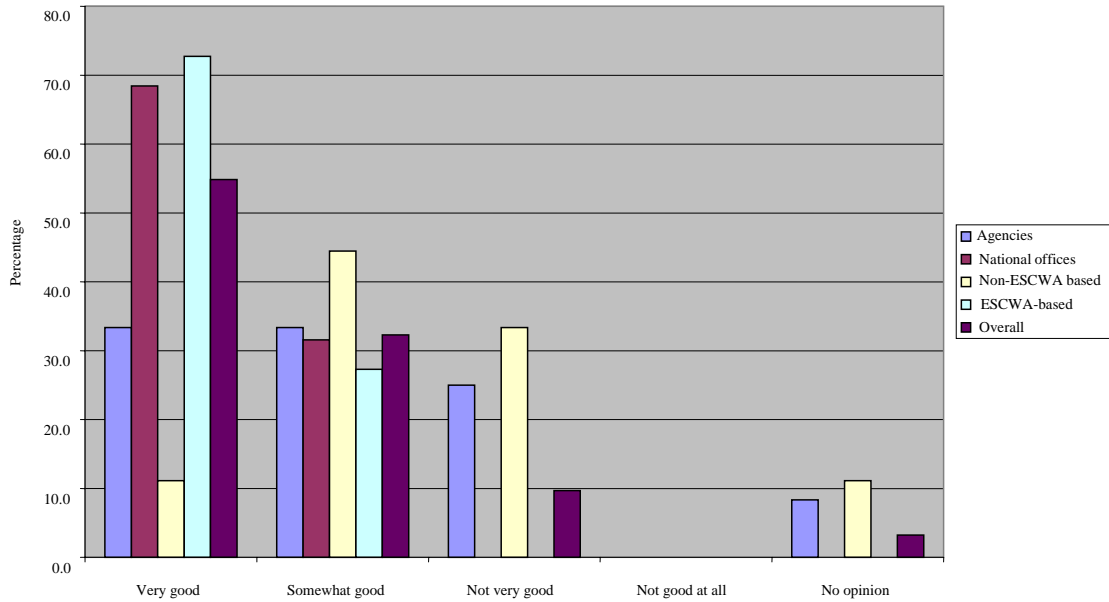
Timeliness of the Bulletin



Transparency of the Bulletin



Layout, formatting and typesetting



Appendix C

OFFICES CONTACTED

Supranational agencies

Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics (AITRS)

African Centre for Statistics, Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Division of Statistics and Economic Projections, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Trade and Investment Division, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

Economic Development and Globalization Division, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

International trade statistics - production, Business Statistics Directorate, Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat)

Statistics Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Statistical Information Management Division, Statistics Department, International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Division of Product and Market Development, International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO (ITC)

International Trade and Globalisation Statistics Section, Statistics Directorate, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Statistics and Information Department, Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC)

International Trade Statistics Section, Trade Statistics Branch, United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD)

International Trade Statistics Section, Economic Research and Statistics Division, World Trade Organization (WTO)

National offices

Central Informatics Organization, Bahrain

Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, Egypt

Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Iraq

Department of Statistics, Jordan

Central Bank of Kuwait

Customs Administration, Lebanon

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

Qatar Statistics Authority

Central Department of Statistics, Saudi Arabia

Ministry of Economy and Trade, Syria

Central Statistics Directorate, United Arab Emirates

Central Statistical Organization, Yemen

Appendix D

MAIN WEBSITES CONSULTED

Supranational agencies

Arab Institute for Research and Training in Statistics, <http://www.aitrs.org/english/index-eng.htm>

Economic Commission for Africa, <http://www.uneca.org/statistics/>

Economic Commission for Europe, <http://www.unece.org/stats/>

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, <http://www.eclac.cl/divisiones/default.asp?idioma=IN>

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, <http://www.unescap.org/stat/>

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, <http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/main.asp?division=sd>

European Central Bank, <http://www.ecb.int/stats/html/index.en.html>

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/es/ess/>

Inter-agency Task Force on International Merchandise Trade Statistics, <http://imts.wto.org/>

International Monetary Fund, <http://www.imf.org/external/data.htm>

International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO, <http://www.intracen.org/menus/products.htm>

The Islamic Centre for the Development of Trade, <http://www.icdt-oic.org/index.aspx#>

Islamic Development Bank, <http://www.isdb.org/>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/statsportal/>

Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, <http://www.opec.org/>

PARIS21 (Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century), <http://www.paris21.org/>

Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries, <http://www.sesrtcic.org/>

Statistical Office of the European Communities, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/>

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, <http://www.unctad.org/statistics/>

United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report Office, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

United Nations Industrial Development Organization, <http://www.unido.org/index.php?id=4879>

United Nations Statistics Division, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/trade/>

World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/>

World Customs Organization, <http://www.wcoomd.org/>

World Tourism Organization, <http://www.unwto.org/statistics/>

World Trade Organization, http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/statis_e.htm

National offices

Central Informatics Organization, Bahrain, <http://www.cio.gov.bh/en/default.asp>

Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, Egypt, <http://www.msrintranet.capmas.gov.eg/pls/fdl/tst12e?action=&lname>

Ministry of Trade and Industry, Egypt, <http://www.mti.gov.eg/English/english.asp>

Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Iraq, <http://www.iraqcosit.org/english/>

Department of Statistics, Jordan, http://www.dos.gov.jo/scb_ec/sdb_ec_e/index.htm

Central Bank of Kuwait, <http://www.cbk.gov.kw/WWW/index.html>

Ministry of Planning, Kuwait, <http://www.mop.gov.kw/MopWebSite/english/Statmenu.asp>

Customs Administration, Lebanon, <http://www.customs.gov.lb/customs/index.htm>

Central Administration for Statistics, Lebanon, http://www.cas.gov.lb/Newsrep_en.asp

Ministry of National Economy, Oman, <http://www.moneoman.gov.om/mainStat.asp>

Central Bank of Oman, <http://www.cbo-oman.org/>

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabID=1&lang=en>

Qatar Statistics Authority, <http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm>

Central Department of Statistics, Saudi Arabia, <http://www.cds.gov.sa/statistic/sindexe.htm>

Ministry of Economy and Trade, Syria, <http://www.syrecon.org/>

Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria, <http://www.cbssyr.org/>

Ministry of Economy and Planning, United Arab Emirates, <http://www.government.ae/gov/en/gov/federal/moec.jsp>

Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates, <http://www.centralbank.ae/index.php>

Central Statistical Organization, Yemen, <http://cso-yemen.org/index.php?lng=english&/>

Central Bank of Yemen, <http://www.centralbank.gov.ye/>

Appendix E

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AITRS	Arab Institute for Training and Research in Statistics
BADECEL	Banco de Datos Estadísticos de Comercio Exterior (foreign trade statistics database)
BEC	Classification by Broad Economic Categories
COMEXT	(Eurostat) reference database containing external trade statistics
Comtrade	United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database
DOT	Direction of Trade Statistics
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECE	Economic Commission for Europe
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
ESIS	ESCWA Statistical Information System
Eurostat	Statistical Office of the European Communities
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HS	Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (Harmonized System)
ICDT	Islamic Centre for Development of Trade
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITC	International Trade Centre UNCTAD/WTO
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PARIS21	Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21 st Century
pdf	portable document format
SESRIC	Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries
SIGCI	Sistema Interactivo Gráfico de Datos de Comercio Internacional (Interactive Graphic System of International Trade Data)
SITC	Standard International Trade Classification
TOR	Terms of Reference
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNSD	United Nations Statistics Division
WTO	World Trade Organization